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Important Considerations for Design and Assessment of Mega Programs

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Process and Criteria*

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**IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN AND ASSESSMENT
OF MEGA PROGRAMS**

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The interim Independent Science and Partnership Council (iISPC) is strongly supportive of the Mega Program (MP) concept. The MPs are the central means and validation of the entire CGIAR reform process where the new CGIAR will come together to deliver the change that donors and partners have long sought. Collectively the MPs must add up to an agricultural research for development agenda that is tightly focussed on high priority areas where the CGIAR has the potential to deliver research results for generating major impacts to its beneficiaries. The ISPC recognises the imperative for haste in agreeing on MPs. However, the ISPC does not wish to see an imperfect process compromise the basic motivation for the reform process. All parties need to focus on an appraisal processes that will force the MPs to evolve in the coming years towards the ideal that the change process was seeking. Therefore it is essential that the deficiencies in the process of launching the MPs should not allow the establishment of anything less than a culture for scientific excellence and best practice in the future MPs. The process has to be seen as a continuing search for excellence and focus that will continue as the MPs evolve. The MPs therefore need to be assessed in this context.

In the following, the iISPC elaborates some important issues related to the current process of developing the Strategy and Results Framework (SRF) and the design and assessment of MPs. This note reflects the discussions at the recent workshop organised by the ISPC in Rome. The workshop created a forum for discussing important success and failure factors of large programs and how these can be taken into account in the CGIAR context.

There are some fundamental aspects about the CGIAR and its reform process that need to be taken into account when moving towards research implementation through MPs and in assessing the Program proposals. It is important not to lose sight of the fundamental benefits that should be achieved through re-organisation of research around MPs. The iISPC understands these as follows:

- The MPs will drive change in the CGIAR. They will reinforce focus of the CGIAR's efforts on a reduced set of high impact R&D programmes that will focus on those global challenges for which the CGIAR has a comparative advantage.
- The MPs will be demand driven and they will put development challenges and expected impact at the center of resource allocation. They will eliminate redundancy and mission creep, and reduce the imperatives for institutional survival.
- The MPs should therefore be about changing the CGIAR and not about maintaining the status quo. The MP development process should convincingly embrace change and rather than being akin to re-arranging all on-going activities.
- The MPs should help restore and elevate the scientific excellence that should characterise the CGIAR and where there are indications of decline in recent years as evidenced by the Social Science Stripe Review.
- Through implementation of MPs, the CGIAR should be aligned with the general tendency of modern R&D to be organised around time-bound consortia and partnerships that put the problem first and the interests of the institutions second. That

requires better exploitation of the convening power of the Centers rather than the use of their existing installed capacity.

1. Ideally the SRF should lead the MP development and define the relationships of the MPs to the CGIAR goals. The inter-linkages and synergy between MPs, and the supporting platforms, should be the responsibility of the Consortium Board. In reality the SRF is being prepared by the same organizations and individuals who are also in charge of developing MP plans. These two processes are currently running in parallel. The situation is affected by an understandable urgency particularly from the funders' side that the CGIAR ought to move to MP implementation as swiftly as possible after three years of reform and transition. This situation leads to some unavoidable retrofitting of MPs with the SRF. The assessment process should nevertheless be able to direct the individual programs and their portfolio towards being a coherent presentation of an agenda to implement the SRF. The implication for the CGIAR is that the SRF needs to be seen as an evolving document, which becomes the Consortium Board's responsibility and at some near time horizon begins to direct the evolution of the MP portfolio.

2. The CGIAR's MPs are not being approved through a competitive process. Assessment is therefore intended to improve the quality and relevance of the MPs and not to simply approve or reject them.

3. Not all the MPs will be designed and reviewed simultaneously. Some MPs are being fast-tracked on a much tighter schedule than the other programs. This makes the assessment of the appropriateness of the portfolio and the relative importance and appropriate size of the MPs, and synergies and complementarities between them difficult if not impossible to determine. It would be undesirable if the fast-tracked programs were seen (even by themselves) as deserving advantage in the competition for funds. It would be desirable to assess the programs' relative contributions to the SRF and the inter-linkages between them within 1-2 years when all proposals have been submitted. This would allow evaluation of 1) the maturation of MP proposals in a time when they will move from current contracted research to projected future research; 2) the agreement with the SRF and new trends; and 3) the proper placement of platforms and system support units and policies.

4. The MPs currently developed bring together much, probably most, of the on-going research at the Centers conducted, for the most part, under grant contracts. There will be need to guard against the inclusion of activities that the CGIAR should not be doing and for which it has no comparative advantage. As would be expected, there is reluctance on the part of Centers to leave out any of their activities that are currently funded. Furthermore, much of what is going on fits at least loosely under the generic headings of the MPs. Because much of the work is funded by grants, the contractual agreements need to be brought to an end before conducting a more stringent screening of which components of on-going research ought to remain in a MP and where to redirect parts of the Programs. This has implications for the first round of MP assessments that needs to incorporate a time dimension from what is current Center reality to fully considered coherent MPs over a 2-3 year transition.

5. The Mega Programs are being developed by independent Centers with independent Boards of Trustees. The Consortium Board currently foresees that one hosting Center will take a leading role in the management of the program. The iISPC favours a mechanism in which the hosting role of a Center is emphasised, rather than leading role, and the program leadership is explicitly designed and empowered for serving the MP across Centers and other partners,

perhaps by reporting to the CEO or Consortium Board directly. The host/lead Center's and Center Board's roles need to be reconciled with the accumulated experience indicating that strong, visionary and empowered program leadership is an essential success factor for a large multi-partner program.

6. In the transition from the current funding characterised as being increasingly fragmented, idiosyncratic and short-term to large, coherent programs adequately funded from the CGIAR Fund, attention needs to be paid to the risk of having different rules and practices for different component of a Program depending on its funding source. In the transition, coherence, reporting, leadership and monitoring may all run the risk of splitting according to the nature of funding. This could slow down the transition and be detrimental for vision and motivation that drive strong programs. Ideally, the MPs should subsume the interests of individual Centers and funders for the Program, use Centers for their convening role (rather than infrastructure), increase the virtual nature of Centers and make the CGIAR more inclusive of other partners. The MPs should make the CGIAR a system where the best and most innovative scientists want to work.

7. The governance mechanisms of the Mega Programs are being debated. Drawing from the experience from the Challenge Programs where different governance mechanisms were tested and observed, the iISPC considers that governance of MPs should not reside in a single one of the organizations involved in the MP. Center Boards would maintain their oversight role regarding their respective Centers including a fiduciary role where the Board has legal responsibility. Arrangements that could lead to conflict between the interests of the lead (or hosting) Center and the MP, and a Center Board and the Consortium Board should be avoided. The Consortium Board should have the overarching oversight role of all the MPs. An intermediate, light governance arrangement between the MP and the Consortium Board would provide direct oversight on financial management, delivery on performance contract, abiding to common ethical, IP and other policies, links to Centers and other MPs, etc. .